

Describing Vernacular Literacy Practices to Enhance Understanding of Community Information Needs

A Case Study with Practical Implications

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Key documents guiding U.S. library service, including Reference and User Service Association (RUSA) guidelines and the American Library Association (ALA) Code of Ethics and Bill of Rights, focus on equitable public library service. By viewing literacy practices as an increasingly crucial realm of the social structure, librarians, policy makers, social researchers, and other interested groups can better understand information barriers that result in social inequality. A clear understanding of vernacular literacy will afford librarians greater insight to the information needs of the public, including a greater understanding of nonusers of their libraries.

The reality of providing materials in multiple languages to meet information needs for multiple cultures is more complicated than simply looking at demographics that are available through the Department of the Census. This study demonstrates the value of field research to more fully understand the literacy needs of one's service community.

In its Guidelines for Information Services, RUSA states that "information services in libraries take a variety of forms including . . . dissemination of information in anticipation of user needs or interests."¹ Literacy products evident in the community al-

low libraries to better understand their communities of users and nonusers and allow librarians to think about community information needs from a different perspective. These literacy products demonstrate how a community is using literacy socially, which is not always the way literacy is viewed in libraries. The difference comes from a focus on literacy as a tool used to accomplish an end rather than a social or status marker where one gains prestige or emotional satisfaction in the act of reading itself. By focusing on reading and writing outside of the library, librarians might be able to determine the needs of library users and nonusers, allowing them to better meet those needs and anticipate community interest.

The current study expands upon Barton and Hamilton's study of self-generated literacy products (i.e., the things that are read, such as books, magazines, graffiti, and signs) within a community, focusing more specifically on the Latino minority population and their use of literacy and language choice.² We used Barton and Hamilton's concept of vernacular literacy as a guide to explore how literacy was used by Latinos in a quotidian context. Barton and Hamilton suggest that by studying the artifacts produced by a group we can attempt to connect beliefs about

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what is useful and appropriate for communication within and between cultures. The authors chose Kansas City as the locale for field research on this topic because of its rapidly changing ethnic and cultural landscape. The wide variety of languages noted in public signage and graffiti is an indication of cultural change. The settings in which the various languages occur indicate the uses of the dominant language (English) and the vernacular (various languages other than English). The intention of this study was to reexamine the cultural landscape of information exchange to suggest ways to improve equitable access to libraries.

This study focuses on both literacy products, as defined above, and on verbal communication. While many languages were observed throughout the Kansas City region, as a means to reduce the scope of observation to selected areas (and because of our familiarity with the Spanish language) the researchers focus on Spanish and English literacy. We travelled to different parts of the city and visited a variety of public venues in order to discover where Spanish was spoken and written and where English was spoken and written, particularly in historically Hispanic neighborhoods. We employed ethnographic field methods, including photography, interviews, and observation of people in public places, to record observable instances of these two types of communication in these two languages. By focusing on the two facets of language listed above, we were able to record a holistic picture of who is using which language and when.

DEFINITIONS OF LITERACY

An acceptable modern definition of literacy might be the one used by the U.S. Department of Education for their national adult literacy surveys of 1992 and 2003: “using printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one’s goals, and to develop one’s knowledge and potential.”³ Literacy includes the ability to interpret written information, understand the message being communicated, and the ability to communicate one’s own message through writing. Using this definition, we can see that reading a book and writing an essay are literacy practices, and we can also see that tagging a school wall with graffiti and understanding the other tags on that wall are also literacy practices, though they take place in very different social contexts.⁴

Literacy Practices

As a functional skill, literacy includes practices

viewed by the dominant society as being necessary to function within that society. This might include filling out job applications and tax forms or reading prescription labels and nutrition information. Literacy as a social practice, however, emphasizes communication. This communication can be within a culture, such as might occur when a new immigrant writes to her family in another country, or between cultures, with an immigrant mother writing a note to her child’s school teacher.

Literacy practices are values and beliefs that underlie literacy events and determine how someone will respond to a particular literacy challenge. These literacy practices include beliefs about when writing is appropriate or preferred over oral communication, what type of language is used, and even which language is preferable. The immigrant mother writing a note to her child’s teacher may decide that it is better to write in English to the teacher, while she would write in her native language to her family. She would use a less formal language in her letters home than she would in her letters to school.

Literacy Events

Literacy events, on the other hand, are those actual, verifiable activities that can be observed. A man reading a newspaper on the bus and a teenager text messaging her friends are both demonstrating the literacy practices accepted within their referent subcultures. Literacy practices are generally inferred from both literacy events and people’s discussions of the roles of literacy in their lives.

Literacy Products

Literacy products are the things that are read—books, magazines, graffiti, signs, and so forth. We use the term “environmental literacy” to refer to the literacy products that can be seen in public by a casual observer or the literacy products that are available in one’s environment. These can embody dominant or vernacular literacy and can be written in, for instance, Spanish, English, both, or neither.

Dominant and Vernacular Literacies

Barton and Hamilton posit a difference between dominant and vernacular literacy practices. Dominant literacy practices are those which are regulated by authority, structured, and specifically taught, sometimes in isolation. Dominant literacy practices emphasize reading for reading’s sake, or reading for emotional or intellectual growth. With

their collections of books, periodicals, full-text databases, and children's collections, public libraries are very much promoters of dominant literacy.

Vernacular literacy is self-generated, regulated by cultural norms, situationally mediated, and involves an element of cognitive apprenticeship. Learners are incorporated into the social practices of experts. Vernacular literacy has a purpose within a community. While this literacy is sometimes not accepted by dominant cultures, it is nonetheless a valid manifestation of a culture, and in its own way also requires the active participation of the reader in reading, understanding, and incorporating the written product into the reader's own mindset. Examples of vernacular literacy cited by Barton and Hamilton include writing a private diary, making a grocery list, copying recipes for friends and relatives, creating flyers about neighborhood issues, or putting up posters about a lost pet.

Vernacular literacy products and practices demonstrate literacy as a community of practice. In school we read in order to prepare for tests or to demonstrate our ability to read, but at home we read directions, examine schematics, and write lists so we can do something. In this process we are guided by parents, siblings, or caretakers who help us use reading to put together models, fix cars, or prepare meals. Thus, looking at vernacular literacy offers librarians the potential to see how literacy is being actively used and promoted within a community. Separating dominant and vernacular literacies may help librarians better understand the literacy needs of their communities by focusing on how reading and writing are actually used rather than emphasizing the aesthetic pleasures of reading.

This practical view of literacy affirms the legitimacy of the vernacular, or "othered" literacies. Street, in discussing the practice of literacy and language in the international context, emphasizes that "questions regarding which literacy is appropriate for a given context . . . is itself a political question, not simply a matter of neutral choice by technical 'experts.'"⁵ Educators and librarians become de facto experts when choosing what is appropriate for a given situation. Observing how the community uses language is a way for libraries and librarians to guide practice of librarianship and affirm the library's commitment to equality.

LITERACY, LIBRARIES, AND LATINO POPULATIONS

Latino immigrants in the United States tend to be eager to improve their English language literacy skills, viewing these skills as essential to

success in this country. Research suggests that Latina women are most likely to do the "literacy work" of the household, such as filling out school enrollment forms.⁶ However, Latinos score lower than non-Latinos in measures of English-language literacy.⁷ Latino children are less likely to be involved in "home literacy practices" such as being read to, told stories, or taken to libraries.⁸ Latinos also have lower high school graduation rates and lower participation in postsecondary education.⁹ Studies of new Latino populations in the rural Midwest demonstrate that libraries, health clinics, and social service agencies often lack facilities to deal with people who are not English-literate.¹⁰ In the United States, a society where literacy is often taken for granted, literacy difficulties may preclude receiving educational and health benefits, full employment, or participation in civic life.

The public library is ideally placed to help Latino adults increase literacy skill, while schools and school libraries are well placed to help Latino children do the same. However, libraries are designed to "preserve and transmit the dominant culture."¹¹ Librarians' choice of relevant materials to support literacy may be different from the choices that Latinos would make. For instance, children who come from a bilingual or Spanish-monolingual family environment may understand books and reading in different ways than do children from English-monolingual backgrounds.¹² As Chu's research on the literacy practices of minority populations demonstrates, literacy practices are influenced by social life, networks, education, family roles, economic status, and length of residency.¹³

Majority-Minority Public Libraries

Majority-minority public libraries are those in which the majority of users are Hispanic or African American.¹⁴ Users of these libraries appropriate library space for their own uses. They come to use the library as a meeting place, a quiet place to read or study, and a place to use computers and technology. These libraries tend to have lower levels of book circulation than do libraries where the primary user base is white.¹⁵ Librarians have suggested various reasons why this might be the case, including suggestions that library books may not be relevant to the majority-minority community.

Services to Non-English Speakers

Services to non-English speakers are certainly not a new focus in libraries but rather an area of continued interest within the profession. The ALA finds that Spanish is, by far, the most supported

non-English language in U.S. libraries, with 78 percent of libraries reporting that they develop services and programs for Spanish speakers.¹⁶ Most importantly for this study, though, they found that literacy continues to be a barrier for non-English speakers and that librarians “can better help linguistically isolated populations and non-linguistically isolated populations have better discourse.”¹⁷ The study also said that the library can serve as a place to “pre-identify groups who may not make themselves known to agencies such as libraries.”¹⁸ In other words, libraries can actively identify those groups who do not visit the library because they do not feel confident in using English-language library resources and can help tailor services to meet the needs of these groups. Some groups are less likely to use library services. If librarians actively identify and cater to such groups (rather than using only passive methods of attracting them, such as collection development), then they might be more likely to use the library.

Recognizing and Legitimizing Multiple Literacies and Serving Multiple, Shifting Cultures

Part of the current study involved interviews with librarians, which reveals that the populations they serve do indeed shift, with new immigrant populations arriving and expanding and others migrating out of the area. Language is somewhat ephemeral; it moves with a population. A fluid population is difficult to pinpoint and serve not only because of language, but also because of values and sociocultural backgrounds. Educators and librarians share similar issues involving equitable service in this sense. Ferdman and Weber describe the problem of multiple languages as being one in which

educators struggle to meet the needs of a changing population that has a variety of values, backgrounds, and preparations. The focus has been broadening from one on illiteracy, then, to the larger problem of how to provide diverse people with the specific and expanded literacy skills that require for full participation in a variety of social contexts, including work, school, and home.¹⁹

The problem of equitable service obviously extends beyond communication difficulties. Various studies have indicated that public libraries in poor and/or nonwhite neighborhoods have smaller buildings, fewer resources, and fewer service hours than their counterparts in middle- or upper-income neighborhoods.²⁰ Public policy oriented

toward “leveling the playing field” has not only failed to level that playing field, but also seems to reinforce existing differences between high-socio-economic-status communities with widespread support for dominant literacy and those communities that are less oriented toward the dominant literacy.²¹ However, the lack of dominant literacy focus does not mean there is a lack of literacy. This study indicates a need to validate the legitimacy for both dominant and vernacular literacies in order to have truly equal services.

KANSAS CITY FIELDWORK

The Latino community in Kansas City is situated within a larger population of immigrants and long-term residents, with all the tensions that come from moving toward assimilation and integration while at the same time maintaining one’s own culture. The U.S. Census Bureau estimated the population of Kansas City at 447,306 in 2006.²² Census 2000 data show that 6.9 percent of Kansas City residents were of Hispanic origin, 5.8 percent were foreign-born, and 9.7 percent spoke a language other than English at home. The Latino population is somewhat concentrated in particular areas, but like any other major city, individuals of Hispanic descent can be found in every neighborhood and at every economic level. Our trips through the radio dial revealed at least two Spanish-format radio stations, and we found several Spanish-language television stations available through cable or satellite. The larger Kansas City bookstores, though not located in the neighborhoods we visited, usually had a Spanish-language book section. The public libraries we visited had extensive resources for the Spanish-literate population, including Spanish-language newspapers from Mexico, Spanish-language books, and audiovisual materials.

This study concentrated on neighborhoods with a significant Latino population. However, we found evidence of change and migration rather than simply an ingrained culture. We found that the changes also cause difficulties for the neighborhood libraries because the libraries develop services and collections for the people whom they serve, and when this population changes it means that libraries have to change course. This problem applies both for influxes and outfluxes of a language group. For instance, one of the libraries we visited was in perhaps the most traditionally Latino sections of the city, and that library is changing because of area gentrification; many Spanish speakers are moving out of the area. This library had invested heavily in the Latino culture, and now that area culture was on the wane.

One of the other libraries we visited served many languages—the catalog was searchable in twenty-two different languages—and there was a strong Spanish-speaking population in the area, but there were also significant Arabic, Vietnamese, and other populations.

Methods Used

Fieldworkers used a three-pronged approach, relying on observation, interviews, and document collection to collect data about local literacy practices. Field observations were conducted over a four-month period in a variety of locations, including restaurants, a laundromat, libraries, churches, and stores. Observations were conducted at various public locations around several neighborhoods, at various times of the day. The researchers documented observations of environmental literacy products and events. In this paper, we emphasize literacy products as shaping and framing the community.

The researchers interviewed community leaders such as librarians, adult basic education coordinators, and social service agency administrators regarding their views of literacy and its uses in the Latino community. These interviews helped to define the general role of literacy within the target community. As might be expected, most of the informants viewed literacy in the traditional sense of dominant literacy. In addition, while they did not necessarily think about vernacular literacy practices *per se*, they seemed to view vernacular literacy practices as flowing from dominant literacy rather than having their own purposes and inspiration.

Instances of vernacular literacy were photographed (e.g., graffiti, signage for public areas such as churches, schools, parks, and privately owned enterprises such as stores or yard sales). There were also instances of literacy posted on personal property (e.g., signs in yards or bumper stickers on cars). We sifted through literally hundreds of photographs and revisited our justifications for taking those photos. In those photos, we looked for repeat images and logos as evidence of a community using reading and writing to shape its boundaries. The researchers collected printed documents as well from a variety of locations, including churches, libraries, recreation centers, stores, and other locations. We emphasized the collection of documents that seemed to have an orientation to the Latino community, so we did not collect general community newspapers. We did not collect a copy of every document available at each location. For instance, when the same community newspaper was available at multiple

locations, we collected only one copy and made a note of other copies available at different sites. In all, almost two hundred documents were collected from fifteen sites, with several documents available at more than one site.

ENVIRONMENTAL LITERACY IN KANSAS CITY'S LATINO NEIGHBORHOODS

We asked three questions when analyzing the collected data:

1. What types of literacy products were found?
2. Where were they found?
3. What is the intended function of this literacy product within the environment?

The data collected in the observed neighborhoods of Kansas City indicate that Spanish is the dominant language for environmental literacy products, though English and Spanish are well mixed on texts produced by institutions. Spanish-dominant shops rely on literacy-mediated messages and signage to inform people about their offerings, while chain stores and social service agencies tend to be more reliant on their logos to inform their clients of their services. Overall, however, literacy was seen to be an active process for the Latino community in Kansas City. Signs were painted and repainted, graffiti created, painted over, and recreated. In addition to print literacy (letters and words), visual literacy (images and pictures) was evident in the combinations of pictures and images in written products.

The types of written products we encountered included traditional products such as books, magazines, and newspapers, and less traditional products such as graffiti, street signs, building signs, bumper stickers, car detailing, greeting cards, menus, business cards, handwritten advertisements, warning signs, church bulletins, health- and religion-related flyers, and billboards. The most frequently encountered documents were newspapers oriented toward area Latinos, which were available at a wide variety of locations throughout the community. Other documents included flyers and handouts produced by social service agencies, churches, or schools, typically addressing themes of health, education, and religion. These documents were widely spread through the community, and were products of both dominant and vernacular literacies.

Commercial advertising texts produced by large businesses, such as Univision or McDonalds, produced text-based requests for employees that

tended to be more standardized and “professional” in design. Advertisements for these businesses were generally either written completely in Spanish or were overtly bilingual. However, franchises such as Walgreens, Price Chopper, Taco Bell, or Check Express were less reliant upon words and more reliant upon visual identifiers and logos to communicate their information.

By contrast, the storefronts of locally owned businesses tended to be print-heavy. Exterior signs for these businesses were generally hand painted, often with very extensive printed messages about services available. These signs tended to be Spanish-dominant, though some signs mixed languages freely. They incorporated bold color and visual images, such as a painted bull in a field for a butcher’s shop or a caped chicken at the SuperPollo (i.e., SuperChicken) restaurant. Locally owned businesses also were likely to have hand-written signs, generally in Spanish, advertising extra services: “pay your DISH bill here” or “we have prepay cellular phone cards.” These locally owned businesses were also more likely to have Latino community newspapers and bulletin boards on the premises.

Bulletin boards in local businesses contained numerous advertisements: puppies for sale, DJ and party services, houses and apartments for rent, furniture for sale, and upcoming garage sales. The handwritten advertisements were generally in Spanish and frequently incorporated misspelled or grammatically irregular words. Some signs were printed using software such as Microsoft Office or Publisher. These signs generally demonstrated both an ability to use a computer to create literacy products and more conventional spelling and grammar.

Government agencies such as libraries and community recreation centers did not make public bulletin boards available, and as a result, the texts in their agencies tended to be more mass-produced and standardized. Texts at these locations tended to emphasize personal development and socially segregated leisure opportunities: English-as-a-second-language (ESL) and community classes for adults, Boy Scout activities, and book clubs. It was also common to find Spanish-language health information brochures at these locations, glossy productions that emphasized personal responsibility for one’s health. These brochures often posited healthy behavior for the individual in isolation, without taking into account cultural or familial norms that might have made compliance with these guidelines more complicated for immigrants or people in ethnic communities. This gap between the expectations of national health information providers and the people whom they

are trying to reach might suggest a need for informational strategies that go beyond providing brochures in Spanish.

Neighborhood social service agencies were generally independent from government agencies and often dependent on grant funding and donations. The social services agencies we visited were generally oriented toward providing education and social support for Latinos and Spanish speakers; however, one agency had a more international clientele and made texts in several languages available in its lobby. Agencies typically provided ESL and General Equivalency Diploma (GED) classes, computer training, bilingual preschools, assistance with government forms such as taxes and jury duty requests, as well as practical and immediate needs of food and clothing.

FUNCTIONS OF LITERACY IN THE ENVIRONMENT

The literacy products we found seemed to serve several different purposes. In large part, literacy is used in this community to support economic survival and commercial interests, establish identity and community, and to regulate behavior. Reading and writing have a very strong role in establishing community members’ personal and cultural identities. In our journeys through the neighborhoods, we saw cars and trucks that had been customized with lettering on the windshield or rear window announcing the driver’s name, his or her home state in Mexico (e.g., Michoacan), or his or her religious orientation. These vehicles were in very good condition, shiny and immaculate, indicating a certain amount of identity pride. Neighborhood graffiti often consisted of declarations of neighborhood affiliation (e.g., “North Side”).

There was a vast overlap between literacy used for commercial purposes and literacy used to define identity. Companies that serve the Latino and Spanish-speaking populations capitalize on their command of Latino identity as an inroad into a community. Larger companies sponsored Latino-oriented events such as the Hispanic Heritage Festival, *pachangas* (parties), and local sporting events, most often soccer games. Businesses large and small advertised their services in a citywide pocket-sized Latino directory published by a local business and in a larger Spanish telephone book produced by a national Spanish directory compiler. Many of these advertisements emphasized the bilingual nature of their staff or their length of service within the community.

We found five different locally produced community newspapers. These newspapers reinforced

a Latino identity by reporting news items from Latin American countries, local news of interest to the Latino community, and profiles of influential local Latinos. However, the vast majority of these newspapers were taken up with advertisements for local Latino-serving companies: bakeries, butcher shops, auto sales, insurance and real estate agents, and so forth. It is also worth noting that these community newspapers were not catering to a particular nationality, but writing to a more general Latino or Hispanic audience.

EXTRAPOLATING COMMUNITY INFORMATION NEEDS FROM VERNACULAR LITERACY

This study was a glimpse into the role of literacy within a community, and how literacy practices aid that community in surviving and thriving. The researchers were careful to bear in mind “the ways in which information relates to the social, economic, and professional power structures.”²³ We also consciously avoided taking a deficit theory approach to vernacular literacy, viewing it not as a second-class type of literacy, but rather as literacy in practice, context-based and actively oriented toward problem solving.²⁴

As mentioned above, we found that environmental literacy in the Kansas City Latino community was used to support survival and commercial interests, identity, and community development. Texts are made available in the Latino community by individuals representing themselves, groups, and organizations seeking to affect Latinos and Spanish speakers, businesses, and commercial organizations seeking the business of Latinos and Spanish speakers. These texts are handwritten, painted, produced on computers, professionally printed, or commercially produced and edited. The reading, writing, and language choices made by members of the Latino community in their daily lives can inform library practice on how better to serve that community and can increase intercultural understanding between library staff and their Latino constituents.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Looking at environmental literacy gives us at least two avenues for orienting our library’s services to the community. First, when we look at the literacy products created by community members, we learn what their needs are and how they use literacy to meet those needs. From there, we can begin considering how our library services might be better adapted to community needs. In the Latino

neighborhoods we examined, residents were using literacy as a tool to help themselves meet economic needs and to define a sense of identity in response to a larger and perhaps less welcoming culture. This provides avenues for libraries to develop programs and collections that might be more responsive to community needs.

If we know that money is a problem for our users, we can design promotional materials that emphasize that library programs are free of charge. We can develop programs that help meet someone’s financial needs through job fairs, training opportunities, and workshops on entrepreneurialism. For a community that seeks a sense of identity, programs might emphasize national heritage, traditions, and should involve members of the community as active participants and presenters. Craft programs can emphasize tracking one’s history through oral history and genealogy, or can emphasize creating one’s own statements through airbrushing a t-shirt or creating murals and artwork.

Another advantage to looking at literacy practices and products within a community is that we learn where people in the community go for information, which may not be the library at all! In our study, we did not learn that we could buy puppies or hire a disc jockey at the library. We learned these things from the bulletin boards at the grocery store and bakery respectively. The library may rightly judge itself to be an inappropriate site for this type of information; however, the library too has programs and events to publicize. Doing so at the grocery store or bakery may well attract a new audience. At the very least, it will make the library visible within the community. Knowing where community members turn for information also helps identify people who might make useful collaborators and allies for the library. When the library seeks to do a program, these liaisons can help publicize the program, suggest participants, provide sponsorship, advise on grant opportunities, or even suggest ways the program might be adapted to be more suitable to the community at large.

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